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FM AMCONSUL DUSSELDORF
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 0083
INFO RUCNFRG/FRG COLLECTIVE
RUEHZL/EUROPEAN POLITICAL COLLECTIVE
RUEHDF/AMCONSUL DUSSELDORF 0096

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 03 DUSSELDORF 000022

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E.O. 12958: N/A

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SUBJECT: A TALE OF TWO MOSQUES: A SNAPSHOT OF MUSLIM INTEGRATION IN GERMANY

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11. (SBU) Summary: The ongoing dispute surrounding the construction of a new mosque in Cologne in North Rhine-Westphalia (NRW), the "capital of Islam" in Germany, has become a symbol for the challenges that continue to exist between Muslims and mainstream German society. While all the main political parties and most leading civic organizations support the mosque, the plans have sparked a controversy that continues to make national headlines. In contrast, a mosque in Duisburg, another major center of Muslim life in the state, is nearing completion and has gone up virtually without controversy. This dichotomy illustrates that Muslim integration in NRW is moving forward, but not without a few bumps along the road. End Summary.

Out of the Factory and into the Limelight

12. (U) A new mosque, which will be Germany's largest when completed, is scheduled to be built in the Ehrenfeld district of Cologne. The mosque will replace one that grew out of an old factory and that has been a place of worship for Muslims for over 20 years. It has also served as the national headquarters of the Turkish Islamic Union of the State (Turkish) Agency for Religious Affairs (DITIB). Described by Marlis Brederhorst, Cologne's senior integration official, as something "the Muslim community can be proud of," current plans include a dome at over 113 feet and two minarets at 180 feet each, 1/3 the size of the Cologne Cathedral -- the most important monument in NRW. With a capacity of 2,000 worshipers (almost ten times as many as now), it will accommodate a large community center, shops, and continue to house DITIB headquarters. The largest Muslim organization in Germany, DITIB (which operates approximately 900 mosques in Germany), will fully fund its construction. All mainstream political parties, including Lord Mayor of Cologne Fritz Schramma (CDU) and NRW Minister-President Juergen Ruettgens (CDU), have unanimously supported the plans for the mosque. Plans had moved forward virtually without conflict or controversy -- until recently.

Far-Right Political Group Tries to Hijack Debate

13. (U) A small, vocal, far-right populist group "Pro Koeln," (which won five seats on the Cologne City Council with an anti-immigrant platform in the 2004 local elections) has stepped up its opposition to the mosque in recent months, exploiting the concerns of local residents about traffic and noise problems and trying to frame the mosque as an "attack on German cultural values." Pro Koeln has organized various forms of protest,

including a petition, collecting 23,000 signatures against the mosque (of which some 7,000 signatures were fraudulent), trying (unsuccessfully) to disrupt a recent town hall meeting, and holding a demonstration in Cologne on June 16 (which suffered from low participation (ca 150 participants)). In response, supporters of the mosque, including political parties, church groups, and trade unions, have mobilized various forms of support, including a counter demonstration June 16 which drew more than three times as many participants as the anti-mosque procession.

Angry Rhetoric Makes National Headlines

¶4. (U) While Pro Koeln has not succeeded in stopping the project, Ralph Giordano, a Holocaust survivor and well known liberal German author, has joined opponents, bringing the controversy further -- and national -- attention. His strong criticism of the project has demonstrated that not all mosque opponents are on the right margins of society. Giordano has managed both to offend Muslims and to call into question his credibility within the German intellectual community. Calling the project "a false signal of successful integration," he has charged that it represents "liberal western values being put on the defensive." His message, however, has been clouded by offensive comments, including a reference to women wearing burkas as "human penguins," for which he has also received death threats. Political and religious leaders have condemned these threats. NRW Minister for Family, Women, and Integration Armin Laschet (CDU) has said publicly that he disagrees with Giordano on these points "but he should be able to criticize the mosque without threats to his life."

Some Local Citizens say they are Overlooked and Overshadowed

¶5. (SBU) Neighborhood residents have criticized politicians and DITIB for not involving them in the proposal and decision-making process from the start. A senior Integration Ministry official described DITIB as being "arrogant" in this case, telling us

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"Because DITIB wants to build the new mosque at the site of its present headquarters they didn't see the need to involve local residents. It was a major mistake made by a group that should know better." A senior Turkish diplomat in Cologne recently conceded to the CG that "the consultation process began very late." DITIB only recently informed neighbors about the plans, immediately prompting concerns about traffic and noise. While these concerns have been dwarfed by the publicity around the statements from Pro Koeln and Giordano, attempts have been made to address the more practical concerns, including a town hall meeting at a local school and public relations campaigns. A recent meeting drew approximately 800 citizens -- many more spoke in favor of the mosque than against it.

The Numbers Have It: Idea of Mosque Supported, its Size Questioned

¶6. (U) The residents' criticisms have also resonated within the district and city CDU, whose leaders support the mosque in principle, but unlike the state party leadership, do so with reservations. In an effort to placate their constituents, local CDU leaders have drafted a list of demands, in particular about the dimensions of the mosque, to be presented at a local party convention to be held in August. Faced with the growing public awareness and concern about the size of the mosque, Lord Mayor Fritz Schramma, who initially supported the mosque without reservation, recently stated that the size of the mosque ought to be reconsidered. A recent poll in Cologne showed that 35.5% of respondents support the mosque without reservation, with an additional 27% in support of the mosque if it is built on a smaller scale.

¶7. (SBU) Mehmet Guenet, a lawyer and spokesman for DITIB, told the press recently that the organization understands the traffic concerns and is willing to work to resolve them. He also stated that sermons will be in Turkish, but that a German summary will be given at the end and that on special occasions there will be simultaneous translations. Furthermore, a senior Turkish diplomat in Duesseldorf told the CG that in an effort to address noise concerns there will not be a call to prayer, adding that he would not be surprised if the dimensions of the mosque were reduced.

The Selection of the Architect -- an Open and Transparent Process

¶8. (SBU) While DITIB and city politicians neglected to inform local residents of their plans and solicit their feedback early in the process, local media have reported that the architect was selected in an open and transparent manner. DITIB followed the procedures for the erection of public buildings without being required to do so, and an architectural competition was held with a prominent and representative selection committee, including an individual from the Cologne Cathedral. The committee selected the famous German architect Paul Boehm whose progressive design symbolizes openness and transparency. Boehm has traditionally designed churches and this is his first mosque design. The senior Turkish diplomat in Duesseldorf observed that the committee wanted to send a strong message to the host city and host culture by choosing a German architect.

Duisburg Mosque: A Mosque Without Controversy ...

¶9. (SBU) Just forty-five minutes away by car from the proposed mosque site in Cologne, another DITIB mosque is being constructed in Duisburg, home to over 100,000 Muslims. When completed (est Dec 2007), this mosque will be the largest in Germany, at least until the Cologne site is complete. This project, however, has experienced notably less controversy, despite its size. In fact, the only major news surrounding this project followed reports that the construction company building the mosque is partly owned by a sympathizer of the right wing extremist NPD party. Several senior officials at the Ministry of Integration attribute this lack of controversy to the fact that DITIB did its due diligence and involved the community. In addition, of the estimated 7.7 million Euro construction cost, NRW and the EU are funding 3.2 million to finance the large attached community center.

Comment

¶10. (SBU) Despite the controversy, few observers doubt the Cologne mosque will be built. The right to build a mosque at this site is undisputed, the decision cannot be appealed, and

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the project has overwhelming political support. It remains to be seen, however, whether the mosque will be built as designed. The debate surrounding this mosque is not unique; mosques in other parts of Germany have experienced them as well. Of the over 750 operating mosques (many of which have been converted from previous buildings) in NRW, virtually all have been established without dispute. Aside from the lack of consultation in the Cologne case, location has also been a factor in the different public reactions in these two cases. The mosque in Duisburg is being built in a predominantly industrial neighborhood on the outskirts of town, while the mosque in Cologne (though not in the city center) will occupy a much more prominent site in a district of the Rhineland's ancient capital. These cases demonstrate that Muslim integration is moving forward in NRW, but not without bumps along the way.

11. (U) This message was coordinated with Embassy Berlin.
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